

**Covenant History Series**  
***Philemon—A Snapshot of the Gospel***

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Sunday, October 18, 2009

*Introduction*

The letter of Philemon is unique among the letters of Paul, in that it is neither a letter to a church, nor a letter to one of his pastoral assistants, as is the case with his letters to Timothy and Titus. It is, instead, a letter to a man in the church at Colosse, concerning a runaway slave.

The letter seems to have been written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (A.D. 60-62) at about the same time he wrote Ephesians and Colossians. All three letters (Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon) were apparently delivered by the hand of Tychicus, who was accompanied by Onesimus, the runaway slave about whom Paul was writing to Philemon. We gather this by comparing several passages.

<sup>21</sup> So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, *Tychicus* the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. <sup>22</sup> *I have sent him to you* for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts (Eph. 6:21-22)

Compare this with what he says in Colossians 4:7-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Tychicus* will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> *I have sent him to you* for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may

encourage your hearts, <sup>9</sup> *and with him Onesimus*, our faithful and beloved brother, *who is one of you*. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here (Col. 4:7-9)

This Onesimus is the man about whom Paul is writing in his letter to Philemon.

<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my child, *Onesimus*, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup> (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

Here he is making a play on words. Onesimus means “useful.” And Paul says, “Formerly Useful was useless, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.” And then he adds, “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart” (v. 12). He is Philemon’s runaway slave, whom Paul is sending back to him.

In seeking to reconstruct the situation from all the available information, this is the picture that emerges: Philemon was a wealthy Christian man in the city of Colosse, who had perhaps (we don’t know this for sure, but perhaps he had) been converted under Paul’s ministry. Be that as it may, it seems that Philemon was a man of some wealth. We gather this from the fact that he was a slave-owner and had a home large enough to serve as the meeting place of the church.

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker <sup>2</sup> and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, *and the church in your house* (vv. 1-2)

His slave, Onesimus, had run away, and perhaps had even made off with some of Philemon’s goods or money.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it (vv. 17-19a)

So, have you got the picture?

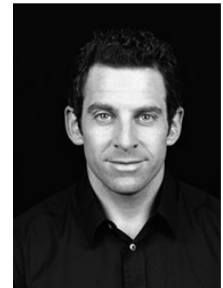


Paul is in prison in Rome, where he comes in to contact with Onesimus and leads him to Christ. Upon learning that he is a run away slave who has defrauded his master, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon in Colosse, along with Tychicus who delivers a letter to the church of Ephesus on the way. Tychicus also delivers the letter to the church at Colosse and the letter to Philemon.

Now why does Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon? Because it is the right thing to do. Philemon has a rightful claim upon Onesimus as his master.

Now we have to say a word or two about this. Slavery, especially given the history of race relations in our nation, is a very touchy issue, and there is a lot of confusion about it. We would do well to understand the subject because antichristians seize upon the fact that the Bible sanctions slavery, and they try to use that fact against us. They think they have the moral high-ground in the matter. Take atheist Sam Harris, for instance. In his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he writes,

In assessing the moral wisdom of the Bible, it is useful to consider moral questions that have been solved to everyone's satisfaction. Consider the question of slavery. The entire civilized world now agrees that slavery is an abomination. What moral instruction do we get from the God of Abraham on the subject? Consult the Bible, and you will discover that the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves...



Sam Harris  
(b. 1967)

He goes on to cite Leviticus 25:44-46, which gives instructions concerning the treatment of slaves and the distinctions to be made between slaves who are fellow Israelites and those who are from foreign nations.

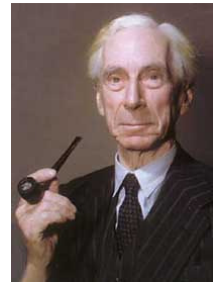
He also says, correctly,

There is no place in the New Testament where Jesus objects to the practice of slavery. St. Paul even admonishes slaves to serve their masters well—and to serve their Christian masters especially well.

And then he quotes Ephesians 6:5 and First Timothy 6:1-4 to make his point, and proceeds to say,

It should be clear from these passages that, while the abolitionists of the nineteenth century were morally right, they were on the losing side of the theological argument. As the Reverend Richard Fuller put it in 1845, “What God sanctioned in the Old Testament, and permitted in the New, cannot be a sin.” The good Reverend was on firm ground here. Nothing in Christian theology remedies the appalling deficiencies of the Bible on what is perhaps the greatest—and *easiest*—moral question our society has ever had to face.<sup>1</sup>

You see here how he is claiming the moral high ground for himself, which is a funny thing for an atheist to do, because in a world where God does not exist, there can be no objective basis for morality. There *is* no moral high ground, precisely because there is no moral *low* ground. In an atheistic world there is just one vast open flatland. Here’s why. If God doesn’t exist, human beings are not created in his image, and therefore have no objective value or inherent rights. They are simply “accidental collocations of atoms,” as Bertrand Russell put it.<sup>2</sup> And what does it matter, really, if one accidental collocation of atoms should capture and enslave another? Any system of morality in a world where God does not exist is arbitrary and meaningless.



Bertrand Russell  
1872-1970

Harris is right when he says that the Bible doesn’t condemn slavery as an inherent moral evil. He’s wrong in his analysis of many other points on the subject; but he is right on that point. And we need to explain this if we want to understand why Paul would not only send

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 14-18

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am NOT a Christian* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 107

Onesimus back to Philemon, but also why he would urge Christians who owned slaves to treat them justly, rather than to urge them to let them go.

So let's deal with this before we move on to examine the details of the letter.

As I have already indicated, the Bible does not condemn and forbid slave-owning, *per se*. Instead it regulates the practice so that slaves are treated justly.

Someone will ask, "How can slaves be treated justly? Isn't slavery itself a great *injustice* to slaves?"

Like so many other things in life...*it depends*. It depends upon (among other things) how the person *became* a slave. The Bible in no uncertain terms condemns the practice of kidnapping for the purpose of turning free men into slaves.

Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him [the stolen man], shall be put to death (Ex. 21:16).

But of course, Sam Harris is never one to allow the facts to get in the way of a good argument; so he didn't quote this passage. It wouldn't have served his purpose. His purpose was to debunk the Bible and the Christian faith; and to do that he couldn't take into account all of the relevant passages of the Bible, only those he thought he could use to serve his purpose.

He also chose not to quote First Timothy 1:8-10, which likewise condemns "man-stealing" or "kidnapping" for the purpose of making slaves.

<sup>8</sup> Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, <sup>9</sup> understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for

those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, *enslavers* [kidnappers]... (1 Tim 1:8-10)

These prohibitions apply to private individuals as well as to slave cartels or even rogue nations making war for the purpose of capturing slaves.

But is being kidnapped the only way someone might be made a slave? The answer is no. The Bible recognizes several forms of lawful slavery, or involuntary servitude.

1. The first is as a means of paying back a debt
  - A. Let's say a man has borrowed a sum of money and is unable to repay what he owes.
    - i. Should he be allowed to default on the loan? No, that's a form of theft. He's stealing from the lender if he doesn't pay back what he owes.
    - ii. Should a third party be forced to pay what the borrower owes? No, because that also is a form of theft (unless, of course, we call the third party a taxpayer, in which case we can call the theft a "bailout")
    - iii. The responsibility should lie upon the borrower. But what if he doesn't have the means to repay?
      - a. If it is a large sum of money, the borrower might become a slave to the lender and work for him until his debt is paid off. The lender has a rightful (or a legal) claim upon the fruit of the borrower's labor until his debt is paid.
      - b. If it is a smaller sum he owes, instead of working directly for the lender, the borrower might be sold to a third party, with the purchase price going to the lender. Then he works as a slave for

the third party until his purchase price is worked off.

- B. The same is true in the case of a thief who is caught, but is unable to repay what he has stolen
  - C. Likewise with other forms of criminal conduct that results in financial loss to the victim. He has a legal liability to make up for the loss he caused.
2. Another form of form of lawful involuntary servitude the Bible recognizes involves captives taken in a just war (defensive war)
- A. What should be done with captives taken in war, or with the fighting men of a defeated enemy?
    - i. They could all be released
      - a. But then they might simply bide their time until they think they're strong enough to renew their hostilities and then you find yourself at war with them again
    - ii. They could all be slaughtered
      - a. This was a common practice in the ancient world and has been known to happen in modern times, as well; give the enemy no quarter
    - iii. They could be enslaved
      - a. This would not only reduce the chance of renewed hostilities, but also contribute to recovering the costs of the war

This is one of the dilemmas that we face with the prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, isn't it? The rationale for keeping them locked up is to prevent them from continuing their fight against us, either in terrorist acts or on the battlefield. In fact, a good number of these prisoners who have been released have reentered the fight.

**The New York Times**

**Later Terror Link Cited for 1 in 7 Freed Detainees**

By ELISABETH BUMILLER  
Published: May 20, 2009

WASHINGTON — An unreleased Pentagon report concludes that about one in seven of the 534 prisoners already transferred abroad from the detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, are engaged in terrorism or militant activity, according to administration officials.

So what do you do? It's not as easy as some people make it sound. Sometimes what sounds good in theory doesn't work out so well in the real world.

So the Scriptures permit involuntary servitude under certain circumstances, in order to make the best out of the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. But the practice is moderated; it's regulated. There are certain rights possessed by those who are slaves. They are to be treated justly, and with consideration. And, at least with those who are slaves because of their debts or crimes, they are to be helped along to gain the moral responsibility and financial independence necessary to live as free men, because there is a length limit to their term of service.

And we should observe also that Biblically sanctioned slavery does not regard the *person* but the *labor* of the slave as the property of the owner. The slave owner has a lawful claim on the labor of the slave. He doesn't own the person; he owns the labor.

This is an important distinction. A slave-owner was not permitted to do whatever he wanted with his slave as he might do with a piece of property. If an owner mistreated a slave so that permanent bodily damage resulted, the slave was to be set free (Ex. 21:26-27). If he murdered his slave he would be punished (Ex. 21:20-21).

Now, this is Biblically sanctioned slavery. It's slavery in Israel, regulated by the law of God, which was far different from how slavery might be practiced—and has been practiced—in other cultures, like Greece and Rome and Egypt and Babylon and Persia.

I should make the point also that many people, Sam Harris included, are under the mistaken impression that slavery was outlawed in the United States by the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. This is not true. The amendment reads as follows.

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime* whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

This is essentially the position of the Bible. Enslaving law-abiding free men, as we have seen, was punishable by death under Biblical law. But those who defaulted on loans or were guilty of crimes for which they were unable to make restitution might be forced to work off their debt. Is that really so unreasonable?

Let me ask you another question. Are those in prison today there voluntarily or involuntarily? Except for a few, who perhaps are willing to trade their liberty for the security of knowing they've got three free meals a day and a free roof over their head, most are there *involuntarily*. The modern prison system is in fact a form of involuntary servitude, in that people are held there against their will—except that prisoners are usually not made to work. We have nearly 2 million sentenced prisoners in the United States being held in various federal or state prisons. Most of them are idle. They are not productive, but instead are a burden to society as billions of tax dollars are being spent to guard, feed, and house them. We really need a whole-scale reform of our judicial system, especially in sentencing. In broad strokes,

instead of putting everyone, regardless of the nature of their crimes, into one large holding tank (prison), those whose crimes have resulted in financial loss ought to be made to work to pay restitution to their victims.

That being said, we come to the matter of Paul sending Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. Paul instructs Onesimus that he has a duty to return. Philemon has a rightful or legal claim on Onesimus. What the basis of that claim was, we don't know. But Paul sends him back. And he sends him back with this request—to let Onesimus have his freedom in order that Onesimus may come back to Paul and minister to his needs while he is in prison.

Read and comment on verses 8-22

*A Snapshot of the Gospel*

Let's take now, a bit closer look at vv. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. <sup>18</sup> If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>18</sup> I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.

This is a beautiful illustration of the gospel. Paul is appealing to Philemon who has been defrauded by Onesimus. He has been wronged, cheated, stolen from. Onesimus has deprived Philemon of the services he owed him, and has stolen what rightfully belonged to him. Philemon has a right to feel aggrieved and to demand punishment. Justice is on his side.

But Paul loves Onesimus, even as Philemon himself does. And Paul appeals to Philemon to show Onesimus mercy.

But what about what Onesimus owes Philemon, what he's defrauded Philemon of? "If he has wronged you at all," Paul says, "or owes you anything, charge that to my account... I will repay it." I will make up for the wrongs of Onesimus. I will pay off his debt.

Now, does this sound familiar? Have you heard anything like this before?

God has been wronged, cheated, and stolen from by sinful men. We have deprived God of the services we owe him. We have robbed God of the glory he would have received from us by our obedience. We have deprived him of what rightfully belongs to him. He is a right to feel aggrieved and to demand punishment. Justice is on his side.

But Jesus loves us, even as God himself does. And Jesus appeals to the Father to show us mercy. And he says, "Receive them, Father, as you as you would receive me—I who am your beloved Son, in whom you are well-pleased. Receive them, as you would receive me."

And he does! But what about what we owe God, what we have defrauded him of? "If they have wronged you at all, Father," Jesus says, "or if they owe you anything, charge that to my account. I will repay it. I will make up for their disobedience. I will pay off their debt to justice. And I will restore your glory."

And that's exactly what Jesus has done for us. Our sins were charged to his account, and he has paid for them for us. He has fully satisfied the claim which was held against us because of our sins. And because of the regard which God has for Christ, his beloved Son in whom he is well-pleased, we are received back into favor. The Father receives us as he receives Christ, because we are joined to Christ by faith.

*Finis*

